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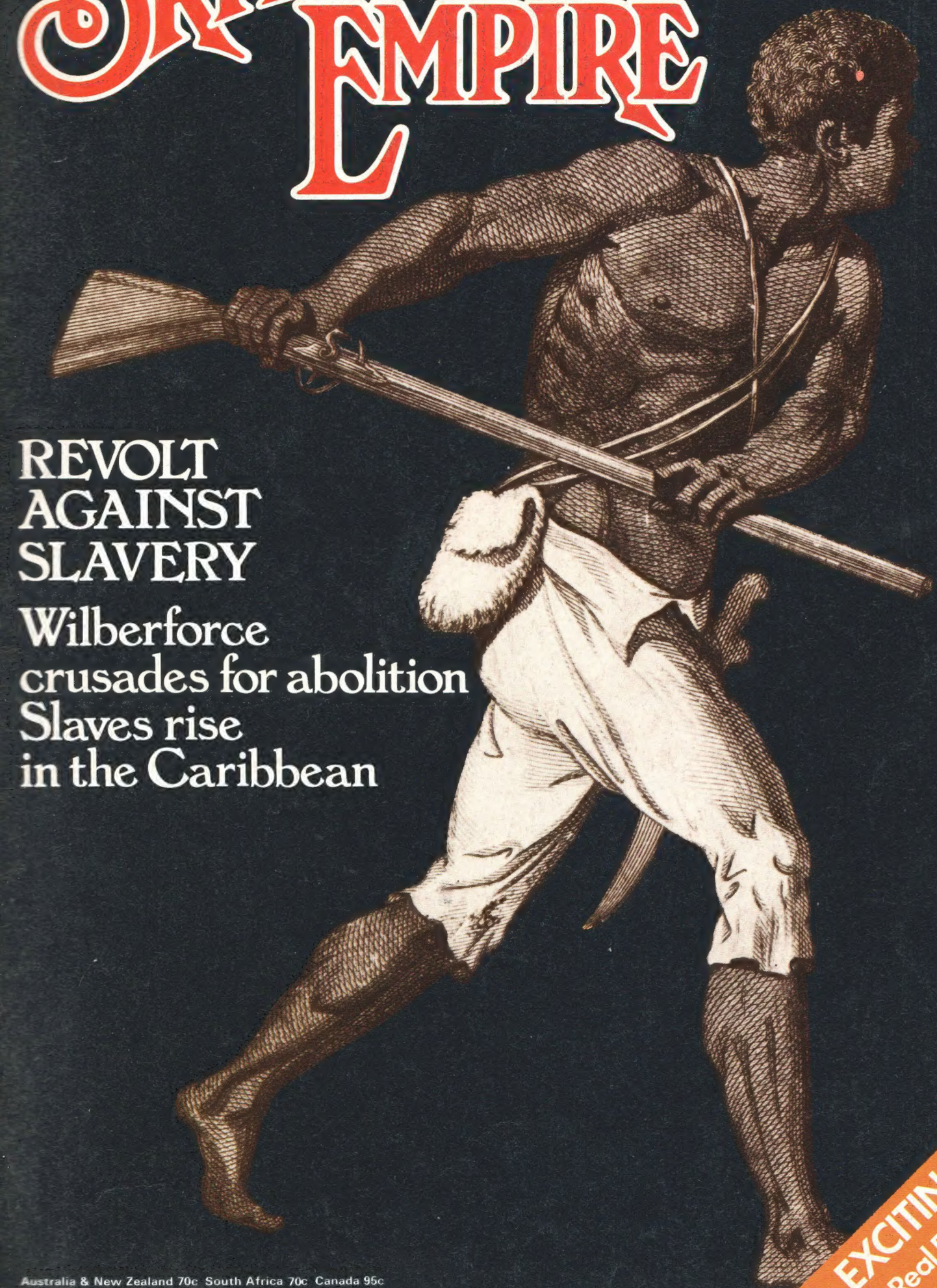

REVOLT AGAINST SLAVERY

Wilberforce crusades for abolition
Slaves rise in the Caribbean

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Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, the authors of the text sections of this issue, had independent careers as journalists prior to their marriage and they continue to contribute articles and interviews as a team. In addition, they have written plays for television and published *The Damn'd Master*, on the Atlantic slave trade. They have also researched the case of the *Zong*, whose captain threw slaves overboard to collect the insurance.

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Issue No. 19: North-West Frontier. Britain's desire to make Afghanistan a buffer state between India and Russia led to the greatest military disaster of the century.

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TANKARD TOKEN

REVOLT AGAINST SLAVERY

It took a long time for Britain to see slave trading as an evil. For 200 years, slavers had shipped human cargoes across the Atlantic without sparking more than the faintest flicker of humanitarian feeling at home. Then in the 18th Century a new, aggressive Christian movement – Evangelicalism – pointed out the hypocrisy of those who called themselves Christians, but by their apathy towards the degradation of slavery denied the equality of all men in the sight of God.

Dedicated reformers such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce began to bludgeon England's politicians into action. They won a few strong supporters, but the times swung against them. The passions raised by the war with Spain and France in the 1780s were all-embracing, and anyone who sought to deflect interest from the struggle was accused of lacking patriotism, even of supporting the enemy.

The campaigns took 50 years to reach a successful conclusion. By that time, the whole economic justification for slavery had been called in question; some historians claim, indeed, that slavery only ended because it had ceased to be profitable. But that in no way detracts from the debt that posterity owes to the abolitionists for their persistent humanitarian struggles.

By Charlotte and Denis Plimmer

England was the most aggressive and the most successful of all the slave-trading nations. But having come to dominate the traffic, she led the world along the road to abolition. To some historians, the story is one of heroic leaders vanquishing the lustful demons of commerce. To others, the tale is more humdrum: slaving ceased to pay, so Britain denied herself that which she no longer needed. There are elements of truth in both views; the problem is to apportion fair shares of validity to each position.

Slaving, as Europeans practised it, was rooted in gain. Colonial powers, opening up the New World, needed cheap and plentiful labour to work their sugar and tobacco plantations. From this need, the triangular trade evolved. On the slaving coasts, white men and African kings bartered for slaves. Across the Atlantic, the whites sold the slaves to planters, and invested the profits in sugar. Back in Europe, they sold the sugar, ploughed the new profits into more trade goods – and set off again for Africa.

Almost from the start, there were men and nations who felt they owed something to their slaves. In the 17th Century, the Spanish, who had been the first to use slaves in the Americas, enacted a few rudimentary statutes to ease the spiritual and material lot of their chattels. Slaves had to be baptized. They were permitted to marry, and owners were forbidden to separate married couples by sale. Masters were encouraged to free their slaves, and slaves themselves could in certain instances buy their freedom.

The French, in 1685, introduced the *Code Noire* (Black Code) which decreed that their slaves, too, must be baptized, and that they need not work on Sundays or religious holidays. The code set minimum, and minimal, standards for clothing, for the care of the sick and the old, and for food – the protein equivalent of a single smoked herring a day. Marriages between black women and white masters were permitted, provided the master first freed the woman. Their children were born free. The *Code Noire,* however, looked better on paper than it was in practice. In French colonies ill-treatment brought about some of the most vicious of all slave uprisings.

The English produced no such codes. Slaving had been recognized from the start as vital to the imperial economy, and the trade had been put in the hands of a company chartered under the Crown. That was all that Westminster felt it necessary to do. The question of treatment, humane or otherwise, they left to the colonists themselves, whose attitudes ranged from indulgent in New England to savage in the sugar islands.

The only bill of rights to emerge from London concerned not the rights of the slaves, but the rights of the Caribbean slave-owners. Faced with rapidly expanding, restive black populations, and kept awake at nights by the examples of insurrections in Spanish-held Puerto Rico, Panama and Hispaniola, and in Britain's own Jamaica, the planters demanded that the mother country give them power to buttress their already great authority over their chattels.

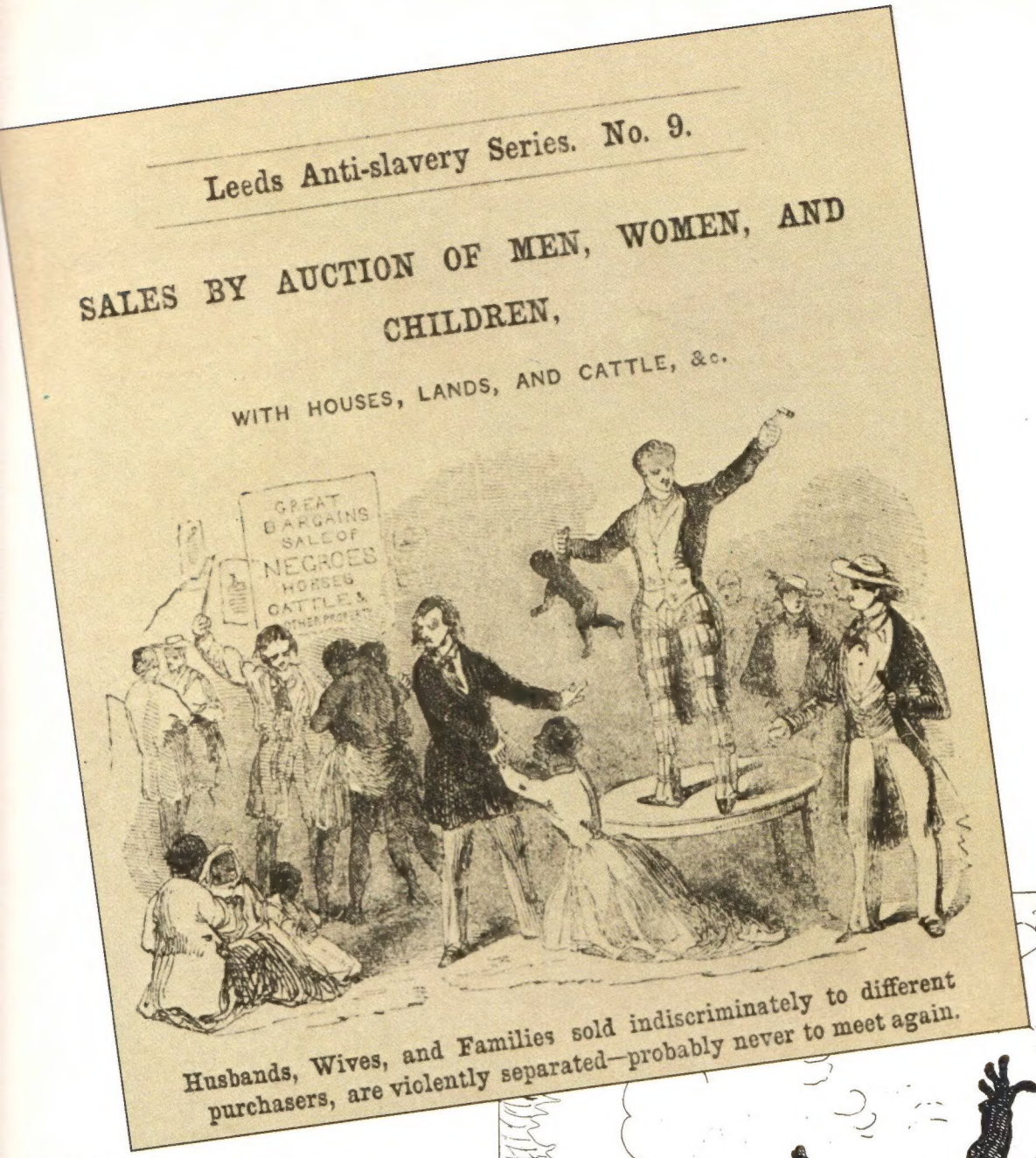
The result, an "Act to regulate the Negroes on the British Plantations," passed in 1667, defined the blacks as "of wild, barbarous and savage nature" and imposed severe restrictions and punishments. Even if a slave were "inadvertently" flogged to death, his master was held to be blameless. But harsh treatment, instead of overawing the Africans, simply drove them to the very deeds it was meant to curtail. There were serious revolts and mass escapes on almost every island.

But the round of repression, insurrection and repression did not go unchallenged. The same century that saw Englishmen enter the trade also saw a few Englishmen begin to oppose it, though anti-slavery sentiment did not yet have grass-roots support, for the ordinary Briton never saw nor ever would see either a plantation or a black in chains. The attack was led by humanitarian philosophers, by creative writers and by certain Quakers.

In 1688, Mrs. Aphra Behn, who had seen slaves at work in Surinam, Netherlands Guiana, wrote a romantic novel, *Oronooko,* which extolled the noble qualities possessed by the slave-hero whose name became the title of her book. Oronooko was the precursor of many 18th-Century "noble savages," including Daniel Defoe's Man Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* and Dr. Johnson's Rasselas. Defoe himself, in his *Reformation of Manners,* wrote:

This 19th-Century painting commemorates

Granville Sharp's first success as an abolitionist. He is restraining a captain in 1767 from taking a slave on board his ship. Two years later the slave was free.



British abolitionists skilfully used visual aids. This pamphlet attacked the barbarities of American slavery. President Jefferson, pondering the problem, wrote: "I tremble for my country when I reflect God is just."

This crude drawing of 1791, based on fact, records the punishment of a slave who was unable to work because he was too ill to get up. He was ducked in a vat of boiling sugar juice and severely burned.

A scathing anti-slavery cartoon lampoons slave-owners for their violent reaction to abolitionism, which threatened the whole of their profitable sugar-based economy.

The harmless Natives basely
the trepan,
And barter Baubles for the
Souls of Men:
The Wretches they to Christian
Climes bring o'er,
To serve worse Heathens than
they did before.

In 1689, the philosopher John Locke began his *Treatise on Civil Government* with these memorable words: "Slavery is so vile and miserable an estate of man, and so directly opposite to the generous temper and courage of our nation, that it is hardly to be conceived that an 'Englishman,' much less a 'gentleman,' should plead for it."

The Quakers as a whole opposed the trade, although a small number of them owned slaves. In 1688, the Quakers of Germantown, Pennsylvania, publicly stigmatized the institution. In the decades that followed, they lobbied Pennsylvania legislators to curtail slave imports by raising import duties. But these moves had little effect on English attitudes. And in the last analysis it was what England thought that mattered.

In England, thought was determined by two agencies – public opinion and the courts. Towards the end of the 17th Century, a number of wealthy colonials retired to England, bringing their domestic slaves with them. Fridays and Oronookos began to be seen in the streets. Sometimes they escaped, and then ordinary people saw them hunted down. Sometimes they were resold, and ordinary people read the advertisements. Some whites began to worry: could the basic tenets of English liberty be ignored on English soil? The question demanded an answer, not only to satisfy the man-in-the-street, but also to satisfy the retired colonials, whose property rights stood in jeopardy. The "West Indian" community turned to the law for clarification.

The legal authorities quarrelled among themselves. One Lord Chief Justice named Holt proclaimed that "as soon as a Negroe comes into England, he becomes free." The Court of Common Pleas, however, ruled that a slave remained a slave because he was a heathen. What, then, of those who had been baptized? In 1729 the Law Officers of the Crown decreed that neither residence in England nor baptism limited the master's property rights. The former colonials could rest safe in the knowledge that their slaves were legally theirs.

Then, one day in 1767, an incident occurred that brought the whole issue to the boil again, a chance encounter that led, step by slow and faltering step, to the eventual abolition of slavery.

Granville Sharp, a 30-year-old junior civil servant who worked in the Tower of London, went to visit his brother, a doctor, in Mincing Lane. There, among the patients waiting for free treatment, he saw a negro, Jonathan Strong. Strong's master, David Lisle, had flogged him mercilessly and battered him about the head with a pistol. Then he had thrown him, crippled and nearly blinded, out into the streets as valueless.

Until then, Sharp had had no particular interest in the rights or wrongs of slavery. But he had a dogged genius for involving himself in causes that struck his fancy, and in pursuing them to the end. He and his brother sent Strong to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and when he had recovered, found him a job running errands for a chemist.

Two years later, Lisle saw Strong in the street. He was once again a well man, once again a valuable property. Lisle promptly reclaimed him, and then sold him to a Jamaica planter, James Kerr. A ship was leaving shortly for Jamaica, so Kerr deposited Strong in a City gaol for safekeeping, pending the sailing date. Strong was able to smuggle out a plea for help to Sharp. In turn Sharp turned to the Lord Mayor, who summoned Strong's new owner.

Kerr's attorney and the ship's captain appeared, to be told by the Lord Mayor that prisons were for criminals, and since the negro had committed no crime, he could not be held. Strong was freed, the skipper seized him, and Sharp threatened to charge him with assault. Reluctantly, the skipper let Strong go. Then past and present owners, Lisle and Kerr, jointly sued Sharp for £200 damages. Sharp's lawyers counselled him not to defend.

But a principle was at stake. Sharp felt morally bound to determine whether, in

British law, one man had the right to own another. He could not believe that "the law of England was so injurious to natural rights as so many lawyers for political reasons had been pleased to assert." For two years he dug through legal tomes and unearthed, among other ammunition, former Lord Chief Justice Holt's opinion. He prepared a carefully reasoned memorandum which he sent in advance to Lisle and Kerr. After their Attorneys read it they persuaded the complainants to drop the suit.

Sharp was the victor by default, but he was not satisfied. The real issue had been skirted, not met. So he went on the war-path. He published his memorandum under a resounding title – *The Injustice and dangerous Tendency of tolerating Slavery in England* – and circulated it to leading jurists, including the current Lord Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield, who had made his position clear in several public statements upholding the sanctity of "property."

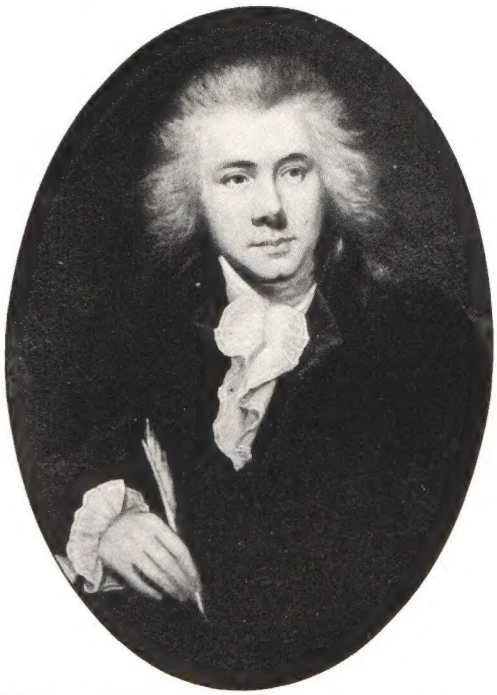
Sharp was resolved to have the issue aired in open court, and he deliberately searched for test-cases. His objective: to entrap a judge into proclaiming that one man legally owned another, so that he could then prove that the right to such ownership did not, under English law, exist. He championed four negroes, one after another, but in each case ownership itself was in dispute, and therefore the results were inconclusive.

The Lord Chief Justice was beginning to believe that the irrepressible amateur, with his self-taught law, might well be right. But he dreaded having to hand down a decision.

Sharp eventually forced Mansfield to speak out by confronting him in court with a completely unambiguous case. It involved the undisputed ownership by Charles Stewart, a Virginia planter, of a slave, James Somerset, who had been brought to England, run away, been recaptured and finally sent to Jamaica to be sold again.

Mansfield begged both parties to abandon the case, to settle it out of court, even to ask Parliament for new legislation. He did not want to bear the responsibility for depriving "West Indians" in England of some £700,000 worth of slave property; nor did he want to send 15,000 blacks out into the streets with no means of support. But Sharp pressed onwards remorselessly.

On June 22, 1772, Mansfield declared to a packed, tense court-room: "The power claimed [of a master over a slave] never was in use here nor acknowledged by the law. . . . The state of Slavery . . . is so odious that nothing can be suffered to support it but positive law. Whatever inconvenience therefore may follow from this decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England, and therefore the black must be discharged." From that time all slaves in



William Wilberforce, a frail, pious man, was the dogged parliamentary advocate who fought for the abolition of the slave trade.

England, whether or not they chose to remain in their old masters' service, were recognized as free men. The Somerset Case marks the beginning of the end of slavery throughout the British Empire.

The poet, William Cowper, rhapsodized:

Slaves cannot breathe in England;
if their lungs
Receive our air, that moment
they are free!
They touch our country, and
their shackles fall.

Mansfield's fears about the newly freed slaves were in part justified. Some found jobs; but hundreds became destitute. Fifteen years later, the government bought a tract of land in Sierra Leone, specifically to absorb emancipated blacks. Among those who benefited were negroes who had fought alongside the British against the Thirteen Colonies in the Revolutionary War. A group of Americans, incidentally, founded Liberia 35 years later, for similar reasons.

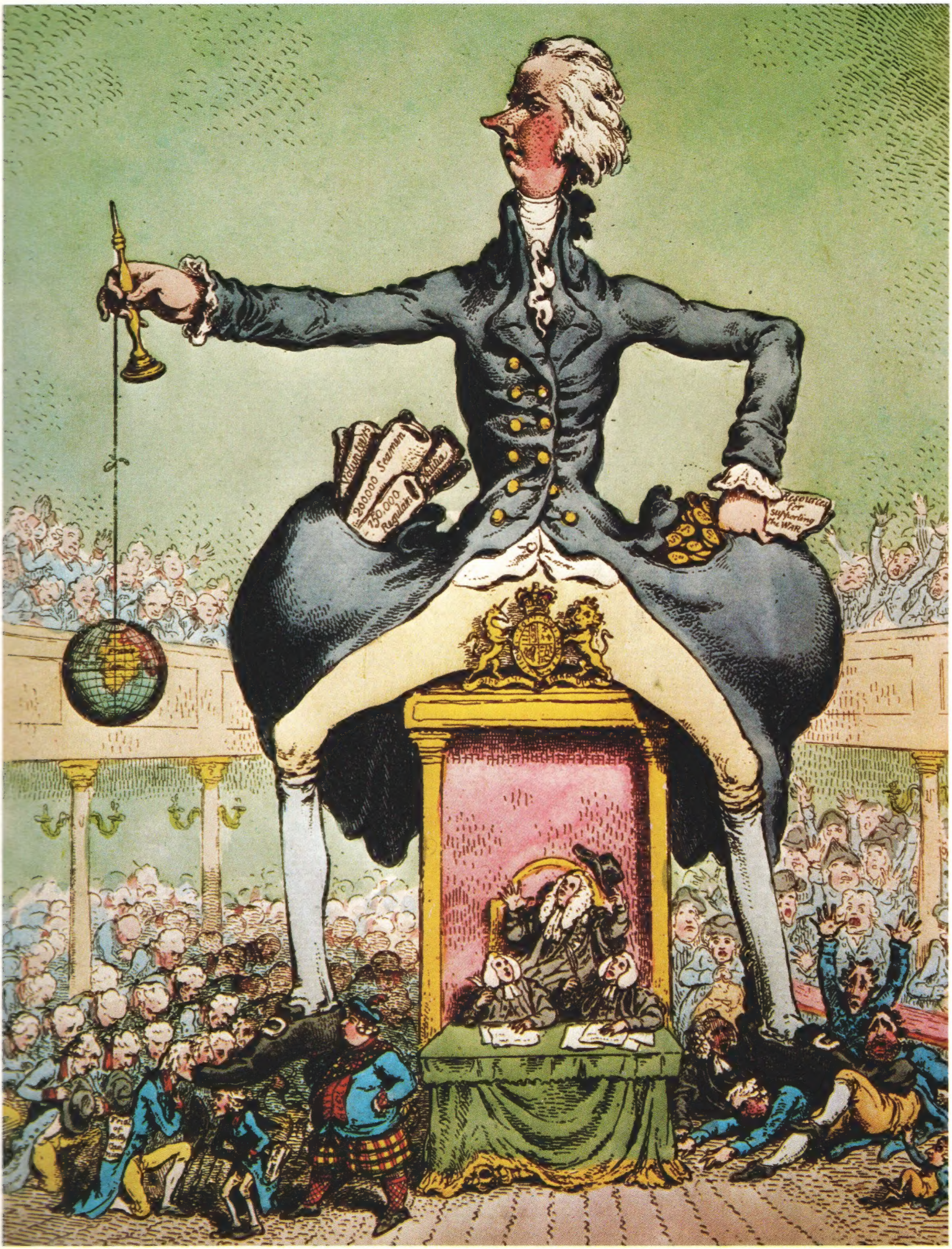
While Mansfield, spurred on by Granville Sharp, was slaughtering one sacred cow – the slave-owner's property rights – Adam Smith, the Scottish economist, was preparing to demolish another, the hitherto unquestioned monetary contribution that slavery made to the Empire. In 1776, his penetrating analysis of pre-industrial economics, *The Wealth of Nations*, concluded: "The experience of all ages and nations demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any."

His argument was well founded. The planters, despite the high prices they were paying for Africans – between £50 and £80 each on some islands – were certainly not using their valuable property in an economic fashion. In part the planters' extravagance reflected personal living standards that were unrealistically high. The household staff of one Jamaica planter consisted of 27 negroes, including butlers, coachmen, postilions, seamstresses, cooks, children's nurses and cleaners. And he was not exceptional. Another Jamaican planter, also conforming to a fairly standard pattern, owned 421 field-workers. But at any given time, almost one-third of them were out of action: ill, too old to work, or too young.

None the less, Adam Smith's conclusions about slavery failed to convince any large section of the public. The government, pressed constantly by planters' lobbies, zealously protected the sugar islands, the source of much wealth. And in 1776, the break-away of the American colonists further hardened opinion against abolition.

In theory, the loss of the colonies should have assisted the cause of the English abolitionists. For had the North Americans remained in the Empire, the pressure of the Virginia, Carolina and Georgia planters, added to that of the

Here Wilberforce is crushed under William Pitt's giant foot as the Prime Minister forces the Commons to vote continued war against France in 1796. Wilberforce's dream of a Parliamentary end to slave-trade had to wait.


Volunteers
200000 Seamen
150,000
Regulars
Militia
Resources
for
supporting the WAR

Abolitionists exploited barbarities, such as the incident when a Captain Kimber punished a 15-year-old negro slave-girl for her insistence on preserving "virgin modesty."

This suggestive anti-abolitionist cartoon shows Wilberforce about to enjoy a black orgy, unsubtly implying that his sympathy for slaves was not purely altruistic.

Wilberforce is attacked for embracing peace with France. He is shown as a toadying weather-vane turned round to support "Republicanism" by the anti-war blast of Charles James Fox.

sugar islanders, might well have delayed emancipation indefinitely. With the owners of 600,000 negroes on the mainland no longer British subjects, the target of the abolitionists was effectively reduced to British-owned Caribbean islands.

However, the revolution constituted a set-back in two other ways. The Royal Navy, which had always depended upon the slavers to provide trained crews in time of need, were now fighting an Atlantic war, and few Englishmen would have agreed that it was either patriotic or sensible to dismantle slavery's great "school for seamen." Adam Smith notwithstanding, with the Thirteen Colonies gone, the financial importance of the sugar islands to England appeared more important than ever, and the voices of their lobbyists, consequently, far more persuasive.

On balance, the Revolution hardened Parliament's heart against abolition. In 1776, the House of Commons summarily threw out a motion against the slave-trade. In 1780, the great Edmund Burke drew up a Bill for the amelioration of the lot of the slaves, as a step towards eventual abolition. But he dared not make it public until 1792. His explanation for the delay was that when he drafted his Bill, "abolition . . . would have appeared a very chimerical object." And not even a man as politically secure as Burke would risk his political reputation on an unpopular horse.

In 1784, a Quaker petition to outlaw the trade was presented to Lord North, and drew the reply that slavery "had . . . become necessary to almost every nation in Europe; and, as it would be next to impossible to induce them all to give it up, so he was apprehensive that the wishes of the humane petitioners could not be accomplished."

The tide of abolitionism had been temporarily stemmed. But there was still a strong tug beneath the surface towards the outer seas of freedom. From time to time the slave-traders themselves helped unwittingly to further the cause, as in the notorious affair of the Liverpool slaving vessel, *Zong*.

Her skipper, Luke Collingwood, set sail for Jamaica in September, 1781, from the island of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea, with 440 slaves below the hatches. The passage was painfully slow. Disease swept the ship and many slaves died; many more were desperately ill. Collingwood realized that the voyage was going to lose money. Then he remembered that his ship's insurance policy covered the loss of any cargo that had to be jettisoned in order to safeguard the rest.

Although he had already made his landfall, he solemnly informed his officers that there wasn't enough water left to keep all the slaves alive. Therefore, he had decided that it would be kinder to jettison the weak ones than to leave them to die of thirst. In three days, his men threw 132 slaves overboard. Ten more evaded the sailors and leapt over the side themselves, preferring suicide to murder.

The underwriters resisted the claim in a court action. But Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, in ruling for the ship's owners, commented caustically that there was "no doubt, though it shocks one very much, that the case was the same as if horses had been thrown overboard."

Only the legal right to jettison cargo had been disputed. The question of the human lives involved did not arise until Granville Sharp, in a report to the Admiralty and the Prime Minister, demanded that Collingwood be tried for murder. As the law stood, however, there were no statutory grounds for such a trial. It became clear to Sharp, and to other like-minded men, that if abolition were ever to become a reality, a mere reinterpretation of the law, as in the Somerset Case that ended slavery in England, would not be enough. What was needed was entirely new legislation specifically tailored to deal with the abolition of the slave-trade.

Although Parliament was in no mood to listen, the national temper was increasingly receptive. In 1783, the same year that saw the end of the Anglo-American conflict, the tenaciously emancipationist Quakers re-entered the field. Six English Friends, joined by Granville Sharp, formed a pressure group which bombarded leaders of political thought with books, pamphlets and articles. In 1785, they published a tract by a French-born Philadelphia Quaker of Huguenot descent, Anthony Benezet: *A Short Account of That Part of Africa Inhabited by Negroes.*

Benezet's broadside became an instrument of history when it fell into the hands of a Cambridge student, Thomas Clarkson, the impecunious son of a clergyman. Clarkson used it as source material for an essay in Latin, *Anne Liceat Invitos in Servitutem Dare?* – "Is it lawful to enslave the unwilling?" – which he entered in a competition. Having won the essay prize, he rode from Cambridge to London, his mind teeming with the force of his own anti-slavery arguments:

"I stopped my horse occasionally and dismounted and walked. I frequently tried to persuade myself . . . that the contents of my essay could not be true. The more, however, I reflected upon . . . the authorities on which they were founded, the more I gave them credit. . . . I sat down disconsolate on the turf by the roadside. . . . Here a thought came into my mind that, if the contents of the essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end."

Clarkson appointed himself that person, abandoned plans for a Church career and started work on his own in London. There he soon met Sharp and the Quakers, and together on May 22, 1787, they founded the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Its emblem was a small porcelain plaque, the contribution of potter Josiah Wedgwood, which showed a bowed negro in chains, surrounded by the words "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" The group distributed thousands of copies.

The Society set itself two tasks: to gather and circulate "such information as may tend to the Abolition of the Slave Trade," and to win Parliamentary support. Clarkson undertook the first. The second fell to a moneyed fashionable and brilliant young Member of Parliament from Hull, William Wilberforce

William Wilberforce was not the stuff of which reformers are usually made. He had inherited a personal fortune and was lavishly self-indulgent. After Cambridge – he came down from St. John's the same year that William Pitt the Younger did from Pembroke – he plunged into the drinking and gambling world of high society, though his dissipations were moderate by the standards of the time. He was undersized, frail and short-sighted, but his social gifts were quite irresistible; he was a brilliant mimic and sang well. And he was courageous

INSURRECTION

The fear of slave uprisings permeated West Indian society and the troubles of two particularly ill-fated colonies – Jamaica and Demerara – are recalled in the pictures on these pages. In Jamaica British planters struggled for more than 100 years to suppress the Maroons, former Spanish slaves who had escaped when the British invaded in 1655. The Maroons quickly established a warrior society, making hit-and-run raids from the remote mountainous interior and swelling their numbers with runaway slaves from the plantations.

Twice full-scale Maroon wars convulsed Jamaica. There was no victory in the first war, only the Peace Treaty of 1739 which cunningly converted the Maroons into a police force for capturing runaways. It was a precarious peace, for the colonists began to treat the Maroons as a conquered people. As time passed, British relations with the largest group, the Maroons of Trelawny parish, became particularly ominous. By 1795 the settlers were so terrified that they launched a costly, eight-month offensive. This time there was a victory of sorts: the colonists offered peace, then promptly dishonoured its terms by deporting the rebels. The remaining Maroons, cowed but still free, withdrew further into their mountains.

Maroons prepare to ambush a platoon of redcoats in a dim forest trail.

Leonard Parkinson (left) was one of the last Maroon captains to make peace in 1796. His stubborn stand symbolized the free and truculent spirit of his people. It was the same spirit that had earlier immortalized the name of Old Cudjoe, the stumpy hero of Maroon history, seen on the right exchanging hats with a British Envoy during the peace talks of 1739.

In 1795 the British had still not adapted their tactics to the terrain. As a result the sudden Maroon forays took a devastating toll of life.

A Maroon warrior, transformed into a colonial policeman by the Peace Treaty of 1739, delivers the death-blow to a rebel named Three-Fingered Jack, a runaway slave who appears in island annals as the "Terror of Jamaica."

Members of the Demerara militia parade in George Town, the island's capital, before marching against the insurgents. Behind them stand the symbols of order: the Colonial Armoury, identified by a cross and, beyond it, the Colony House where court martials were held.

A force of 2,000 Demerara rebels corners a small body of colonial troops on the far side of a canal, forcing it to retreat. It was a short-lived success: the revolt was rapidly suppressed at a cost of only one wounded Englishman, while more than 100 slaves were killed in the process.

Barbaric Reprisals

After an insurrection, a slave-based society showed itself at its worst, as these glimpses of a brief uprising in Demerara show. The slaves had vaguely heard of the passionate controversy over emancipation in Britain, and in 1823, believing that the colonists were illegally denying them freedom, they went on the rampage. The 13,000 rebels, who killed only two whites, were defeated by local troops. In the aftermath of the uprising, the rebels were ruthlessly punished with hangings, torture and dismemberment.

Such acts only succeeded in strengthening the anti-slavery opposition. "The negro mind is still, I think sullen and unsatisfied," wrote the island's Governor in a masterpiece of understatement a year later. In England, more and more people, shocked by the planters' vengeful brutality, came to believe that the trouble had sprung from the iniquity associated with the institution of slavery itself, not, as the planters claimed, from the meddling of "deluded philanthropists."

Heads on stakes and gibbets in the fields provide grisly proof that slavery was indeed as infamous as the abolitionists claimed.

II. A Gruelling Campaign

Wilberforce had turned to Parliament when he was 21, more as a way of filling idle hours than out of any strong political conviction. Pitt entered Parliament the same year, 1780, and for a time shared Wilberforce's house in Wimbledon. Among their close friends were Charles James Fox, another M.P., and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who combined play-writing with politics.

Then there re-entered Wilberforce's life one of his former teachers at Hull Grammar School: Isaac Milner, now a Cambridge don, a distinguished mathematician, President of Queens' College and a notable and militant religionist. He was a product of the great Age of Evangelical Revivalism, started by Wesley some 50 years before, which was now sweeping the lower and middle classes.

High society, however, looked on all such "enthusiasm" – then a term of disparagement – with a cool and cynical eye. Among the upper classes it was fashionable to praise the uncommitted rationalism of two philosophers, the French Voltaire and the Scottish David Hume, without asking how this could be reconciled with a thoroughgoing belief in the Bible. Under Milner's influence, Wilberforce did just this. In 1785, he returned from a journey on the Continent with Milner, ridden by guilt for having – as he saw it – wasted his life. He shunned society and Parliament to resolve the turmoil of doubt in his mind. Finally, after months of anguish, he announced his conversion to Evangelicalism, to the incredulous horror of his friends and deep distress of his mother.

At this point he was brought into contact with an eccentric Anglican minister, John Newton, who had entered the Church after years on the fever-ridden West African coast as a profane and piratical slaving captain. When Wilberforce met him, Newton was Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in the City of London. Drawing on his own vivid memories, Newton preached blazingly to packed pews of awed parishioners, of the horrors of the slave-trade, which, he said, "enforced numbness of the heart" upon all those who served it.

Wilberforce also read Clarkson's tracts. He held endless discussions with him and with James Ramsay, a clergyman and devout anti-slaver who had spent 16 years on the West Indies island of St. Christopher. Wilberforce had found the call he had been waiting for – a call above all party interest, irresistible to a true Christian conscience, and one which he soon believed came directly from God. Wilberforce's decision to fight slavery via the Parliamentary route took place on a summer's day in 1787, when he was sitting under an oak tree with Pitt, who had then been Prime Minister for four years. Pitt, who feared that his close friend would leave politics to devote himself to abolition, suggested: "Wilberforce, why don't you give notice in the House on the subject of the Slave Trade?"

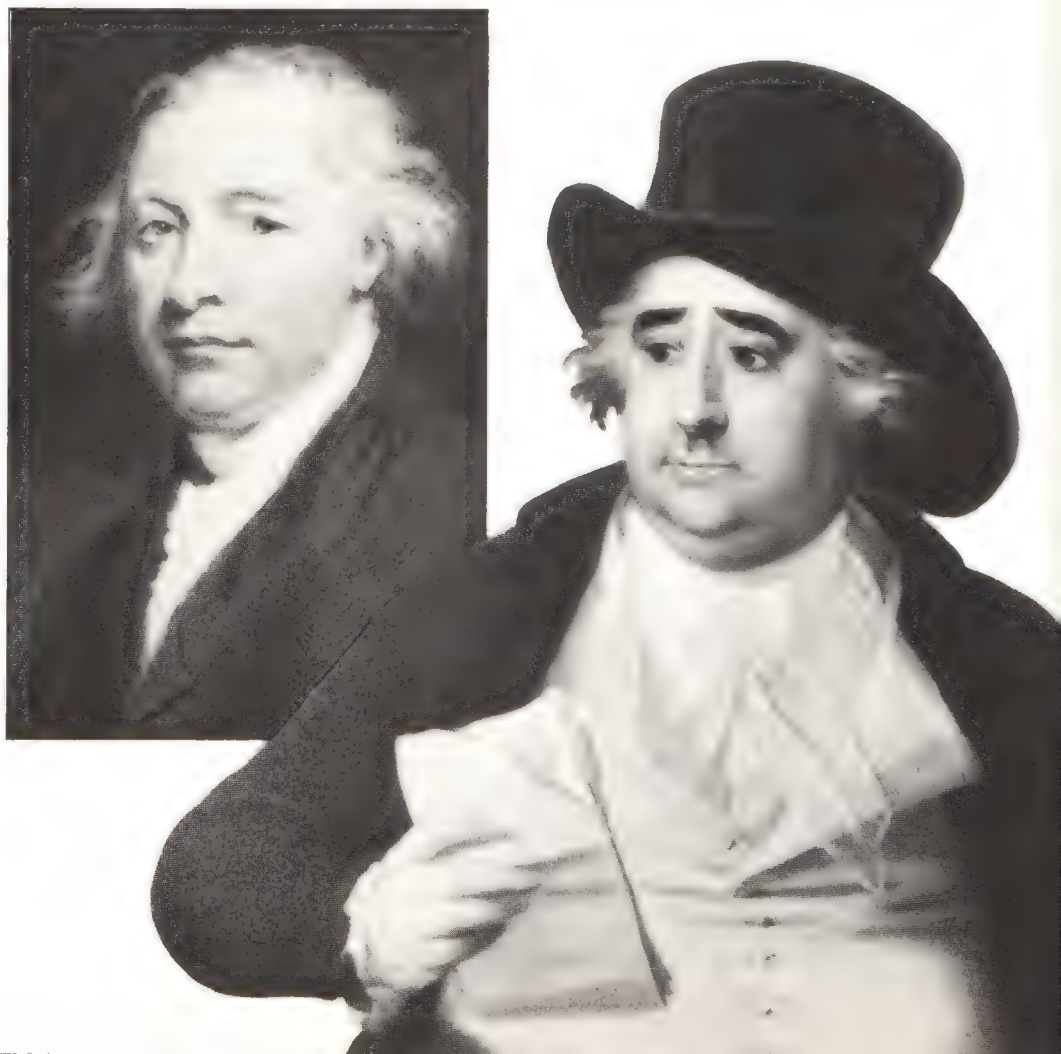
Wilberforce and Clarkson made a formidable team, although apart from their dogged devotion to abolition, they had little in common. Clarkson was massive, unworldly, tongue-tied. Wilberforce was urbane and so beguiling an orator that he was known as "the nightingale of the House." James Boswell, Dr. Johnson's biographer, once heard Wilberforce speak and commented: "I saw what seemed a shrimp mount upon the table, but as I listened, he grew and grew until the shrimp became a whale." Clarkson and Wilberforce worked together, much as solicitor and barrister, the one assembling the brief, the other standing in the full glare of publicity before the bar of Parliament and the nation.

The abolitionists, shrewd and instinctive public relations men, decided that the best way to inflame popular opinion was to concentrate their fire, not on the cruelties meted out to Africans, but on the terrible devastation the slave-trade wreaked among English sailors. Clarkson travelled 3,000 miles on horseback in a few months, gathering facts and figures.

His cases, triply checked for accuracy, were devastating in the horrors they revealed: a sailor beaten to death for denying to his Captain's African mistress the key to the spirits locker; a sailor spreadeagled on the deck, his back branded with red-hot irons and pitch poured into the wounds; a sailor brained with a heavily knotted rope's end. He tabulated the deaths among seamen on nine typical slaving voyages between

Edmund Burke spared a bit of oratory to help the abolitionists, but after 1789 his wrath was reserved for Revolutionary France.

Raffish Charles Fox was a valuable recruit to abolition. He had only to wave his wand, Pitt said, to charm the House.

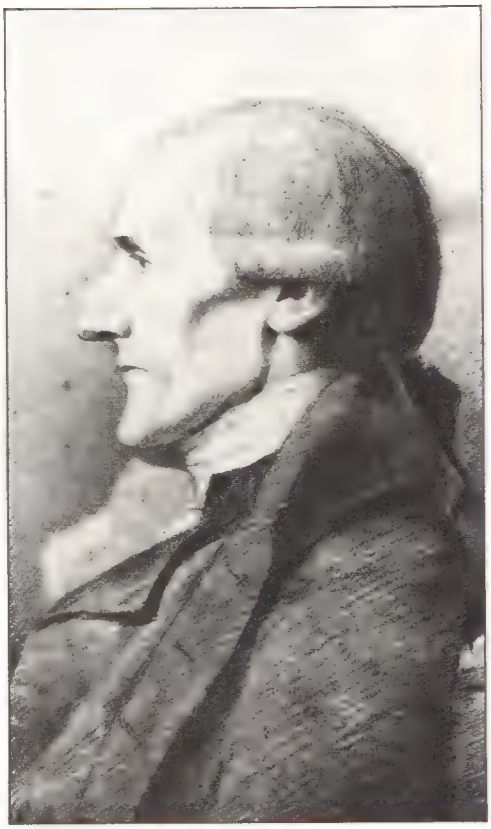


1766 and 1780 – 11 per cent. (Later in the campaign, he tabulated Bristol and Liverpool customs house records of sailors' deaths on slave-ships from 1784 to 1790. The total appalled the nation: 21·5 per cent of the crews perished during these horrifying voyages.)

Clarkson also collected material against the day when the abolitionists would expose the conditions under which the negroes themselves endured the Middle Passage, the transatlantic leg of the triangular trade. He boarded slave-ships and measured slave-decks. He discovered a Severn pleasure-craft built for six passengers which was being used to transport 70 blacks stacked in two layers, with an allowance for headroom of two feet, eight inches. He assembled an exhibit of leg-irons, manacles, thumbscrews and a device called the *speculum oris* (mouth-forcer), used to open the clenched teeth of any African who tried to starve himself to death.

Thomas Clarkson, celebrated by the poet Wordsworth as "Duty's intrepid liegeman," dug out the grisly facts about slavery.

Granville Sharp's religious hatred of evil was matched by a selfless altruism that made him the pioneer of abolition.



Clarkson's was a lonely, frustrating and dangerous crusade. Witnesses suddenly refused to talk. Some had been frightened into silence: some had been bought off; some simply disappeared. Ships' suppliers who gave him depositions were boycotted by slaving merchants. Ships' surgeons who testified found themselves unable to get new seagoing berths. Once a group of Liverpool toughs tried to assassinate him by throwing him from a pierhead into the waters of the harbour, but he managed to fight them off.

Meanwhile, Wilberforce was mounting his big guns in the House. He had the outspoken support of a number of backbenchers who, with him, became known, not entirely mockingly, as the "Saints." He also had the tacit backing of Pitt, Burke and Fox; but these Parliamentary stars were at first reluctant to voice their sentiments in public. Pitt, however, did help Wilberforce by commissioning the Trade Committee of the Privy Council to prepare a detailed and objective report on slaving. When Wilberforce, always in delicate health, fell desperately ill, Pitt took over himself as head of the inquiry and also moved a Resolution binding Parliament to examine the matter when the report was complete. In addition, he made an approach to the French government for parallel action. The French were not interested.

The abolitionists received further support from the Member for Oxford, Sir William Dolben, who had visited a slaver anchored in the Thames and been horrified by the unbelievably cramped slave-quarters. Dolben immediately brought in a Bill to force skippers to allot each African something better than the 16 to 18 inches' elbow-room which was the general rule. The slave-lobby fought back bitterly. But Pitt, now openly abolitionist, supported Dolben, even to the point of threatening to leave the Cabinet. As a result of the Bill, no more than five slaves could be loaded aboard a vessel for every three tons of carrying capacity.

The Privy Council report, which contained a great deal of Clarkson's damning research, was published in April, 1789. It took no sides, merely stated the facts; but the facts were quite enough. The public reacted with revulsion. And the Navy, as Sir George Young, commander of a man-of-war, told Parliament, was forced to recognize that the slave-trade was "not a nursery, but a grave for seamen." In May, Wilberforce opened his campaign in the House with a masterly three-hour speech condemning the trade. The Opposition, however, succeeded in postponing further discussion until the next session by arguing that the House itself ought to hear the evidence and not rely on second-hand evidence from the Privy Council.

As things turned out, Wilberforce's Parliamentary attack could not have been more poorly timed, for he launched it a mere two months before the most shattering political convulsion in French history. In the name of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* for all men, black and white, the French mob destroyed the Bastille.

Clarkson, earnest but naïve, was sure that Pitt's failure to arouse the French earlier in the year could now be reversed. He set off for Paris to lobby the new government. For were not these the men of the Enlightenment, the legislators who were to transmute into reality the philosophical pleas made by three great men, Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu, for the universal rights of man?

His journey was a disaster. The new

Assemblée Nationale, despite its humanitarian professions, suddenly discovered an almost Royalist loyalty to their Empire. Deputies called Clarkson an English spy, intent on undermining French power in the Caribbean, and sent him packing. Back in England, the planters' lobby behaved with striking similarity to the revolutionaries. Clarkson was, they declared, a French spy, intent on undermining the British Empire!

It was a bad start for Wilberforce, and from then on, all the news from France continued to weaken his position. Consistently he spoke with fervour and conviction. Consistently he was supported with warmth and passion by Pitt, Fox and Burke. Consistently the House was friendly, even sympathetic. And, with equal consistency, the deeply ingrained caution of the Commons asserted itself to put legislative brakes on the abolitionist movement.

Parliamentary conservatism proved immoveable, buttressed by the news of the Revolution. In France an age-old social structure was crumbling. Perhaps revolution would spread; better to close ranks against change! Better be safe than sorry! The Caribbean slaving territories with their excellent ports, vital for British men-of-war, and the slaving ships, with their trained crews ready to be impressed into the Navy, must not be tampered with! Legislation against the trade had waited a long time; it could wait a little longer.

By 1791, the violent excesses of Revolutionary Jacobinism across the Channel had succeeded in alienating even the most Francophile of Englishmen. And since English abolitionist thinking had always been equated with French egalitarian thinking, the abolitionists' cause plummeted to a new low.

In that year, too, anti-abolitionists were given the most powerful ammunition of all, when 100,000 French slaves rose on the island of Santo Domingo. The blacks, incensed by the denial of the freedom that Paris had promised them, massacred 2,000 planters and sacked 1,000 plantations. The insurrection-fever spread to other French islands, and even to one small British island, Dominica. The planters and their Parliamentary adherents argued that all this would never have come to pass if whites had not held out false hopes to blacks, and so upset the natural balance between the races. Pitt replied that these disasters merely underlined the wisdom of ending the import of more slaves. The abolitionists vigorously pressed their campaign throughout the winter. But Parliament was unconvinced despite the news from abroad that in March, 1792, Denmark had become the first country to ban the slave-trade.

A close colleague of Pitt's, Henry Dundas, tried to save the day by slightly softening Wilberforce's perennial demand for complete prohibition of the slave-trade. Instead, Dundas proposed that the trade be brought to an end over a period of time and in successive, gradual steps. The Commons agreed, and set 1796 as the final year in which English slavers would be permitted to sail. The measure died in the Lords, less open to public opinion than the Commons, but equally open to the West Indian lobby.

The abolitionists had lost their chance. "Egalitarian" terror in France reached new heights. In 1792, the Revolutionaries declared war on Austria. The following year, they first tried and then guillotined Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette.

Outraged by this and by France's determination to carry revolution to the rest of Europe, England declared war. Now the faintest whiff of liberal thinking was considered as support for Revolutionary Jacobinism, and that was tantamount to treachery.

Wilberforce stood almost alone in his struggle. As the war with France hardened into a bitter trial of strength against Napoleon, every other issue appeared irrelevant. Fox left the House in protest against its single-minded war mentality. Burke, obsessed by hatred for the French Revolutionaries, had abandoned the abolitionists. Before he died in 1797, Dundas, repenting his own proposal, told Wilberforce that he would do everything he could to convince Pitt not to permit the subject even to be debated until after the war had been won.

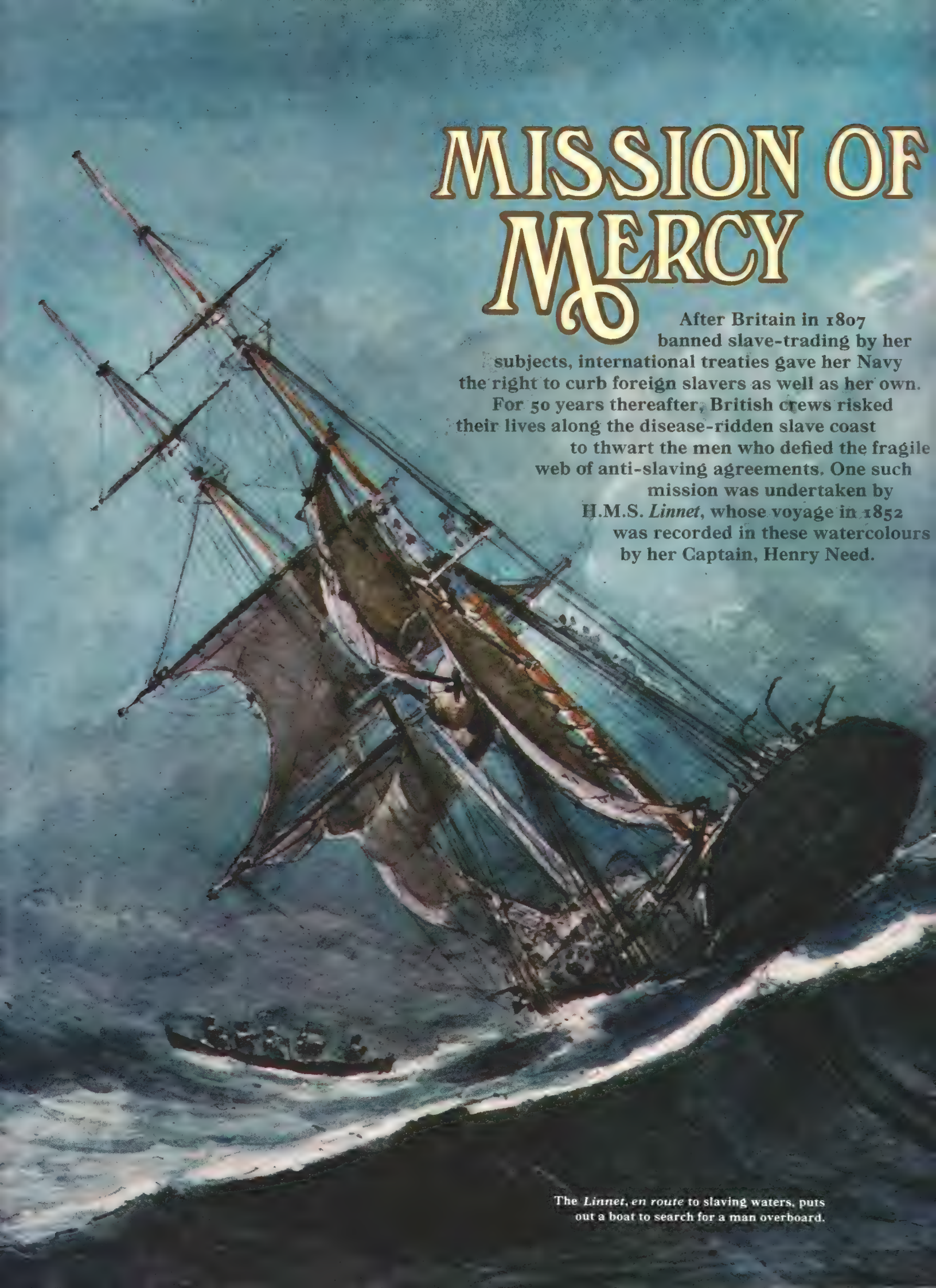
Not only was Wilberforce virtually deserted, but he was also subjected to vicious personal attack. Two slaving captains challenged him to duels. Admiral Nelson excoriated his "damnable doctrine," and his "hypocritical allies." A lady of title was warned, "Your friend, Mr. Wilberforce, will be very happy any morning to hand your Ladyship to the guillotine." Word was spread that he had a black mistress. He was even reported to be giving up the contest until better times. To a man who had fought in the worst of times, this innuendo stung. "When the actual commission of guilt is in question," he said, "a man who fears God is not at liberty."

He went on, year after weary year. In every session he tried to reawaken the issue; and in every session Parliament rejected him. The Abolition Committee never even met between 1797 and 1804, and in 1800 Wilberforce was himself too discouraged to raise the matter. The following year he lost his chief mainstay, when Pitt resigned over an issue far removed from slaving, but equally incendiary in terms of human liberty. Pitt had promised the Irish Catholics equable treatment and complete emancipation under the Act of Union. But when King George III, as defender of the Protestant faith, refused to back him, Pitt felt he had no choice but to go.

During this barren period, Wilberforce and his few remaining cohorts scored only two small victories. By Act of Parliament, the space between decks on slavers was increased; and a system of rewards was established for skippers and ships' surgeons who achieved exceptionally low death-rates among Africans during the Middle Passage.

However, there was a glow on the horizon. The sugar islands, which, for economic reasons, had erected the strongest bulwarks against abolition were unexpectedly to about-face and march side by side with the humanitarians.

In the course of fighting the French, Britain had gained two new Caribbean territories, Guiana and Trinidad; both were underdeveloped and desperately needed slave-labour. Given a sufficient number of African slaves, they could contribute significantly to the national Exchequer. But the longer-established British colonials recognized that the two acquisitions would offer them stiff competition and they were willing to try any measure that might stave off financial disaster. The older colonies already had slaves; if they could prevent the new colonies from importing Africans, their position would be protected. Ironically, the solution they adopted was to take up the ancient demand to outlaw the trade.



MISSION OF MERCY

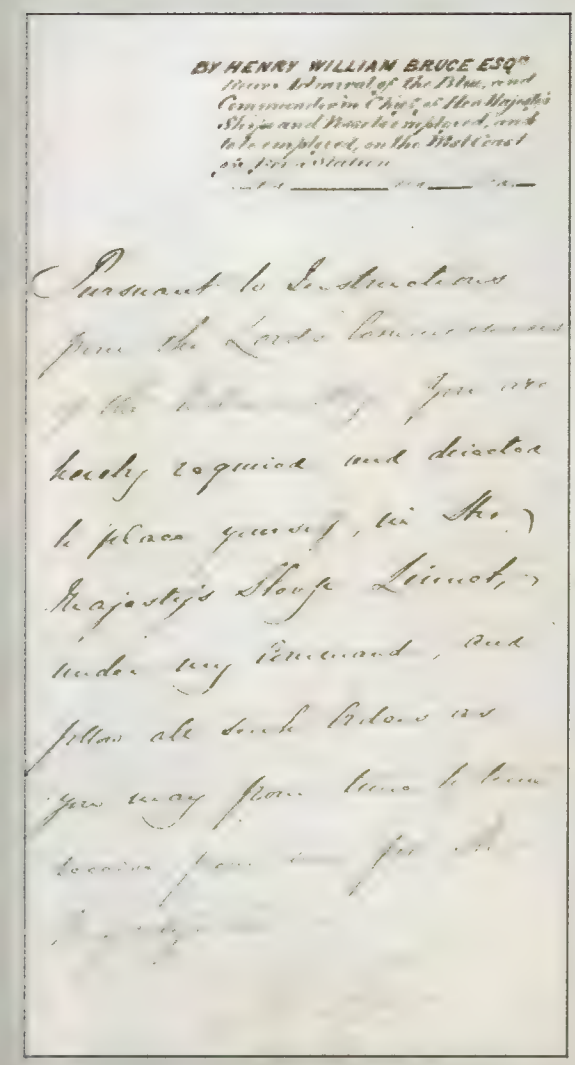
After Britain in 1807 banned slave-trading by her subjects, international treaties gave her Navy the right to curb foreign slavers as well as her own. For 50 years thereafter, British crews risked their lives along the disease-ridden slave coast to thwart the men who defied the fragile web of anti-slaving agreements. One such mission was undertaken by H.M.S. *Linnet*, whose voyage in 1852 was recorded in these watercolours by her Captain, Henry Need.

The *Linnet*, *en route* to slaving waters, puts out a boat to search for a man overboard.

Preparing for a Hazardous Patrol

As the *Linnet* lay in Devonport being fitted out, her crew could anticipate the coming voyage with mixed feelings. Like nearly all the ships on the West Africa Station, the *Linnet* was small and not ideally suited for the stormy seas she was to patrol. Her crew would have to endure treacherous waters, fatal diseases and rot-gut liquor. And the men knew that the patrols were not particularly successful: some 8,000 slaves a year were still being exported to Latin America and to meet the demands of the cotton plantations of the American South.

Nor was morale helped by the knowledge that the anti-slaving patrol, though strongly backed by Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, had many enemies


BY HENRY WILLIAM BRUCE ESQ^R
Rear Admiral of the Blue, and
Commander in Chief of His Majesty's
Ships and Vessels employed, and to be employed, on the Westcoast
of Africa Station

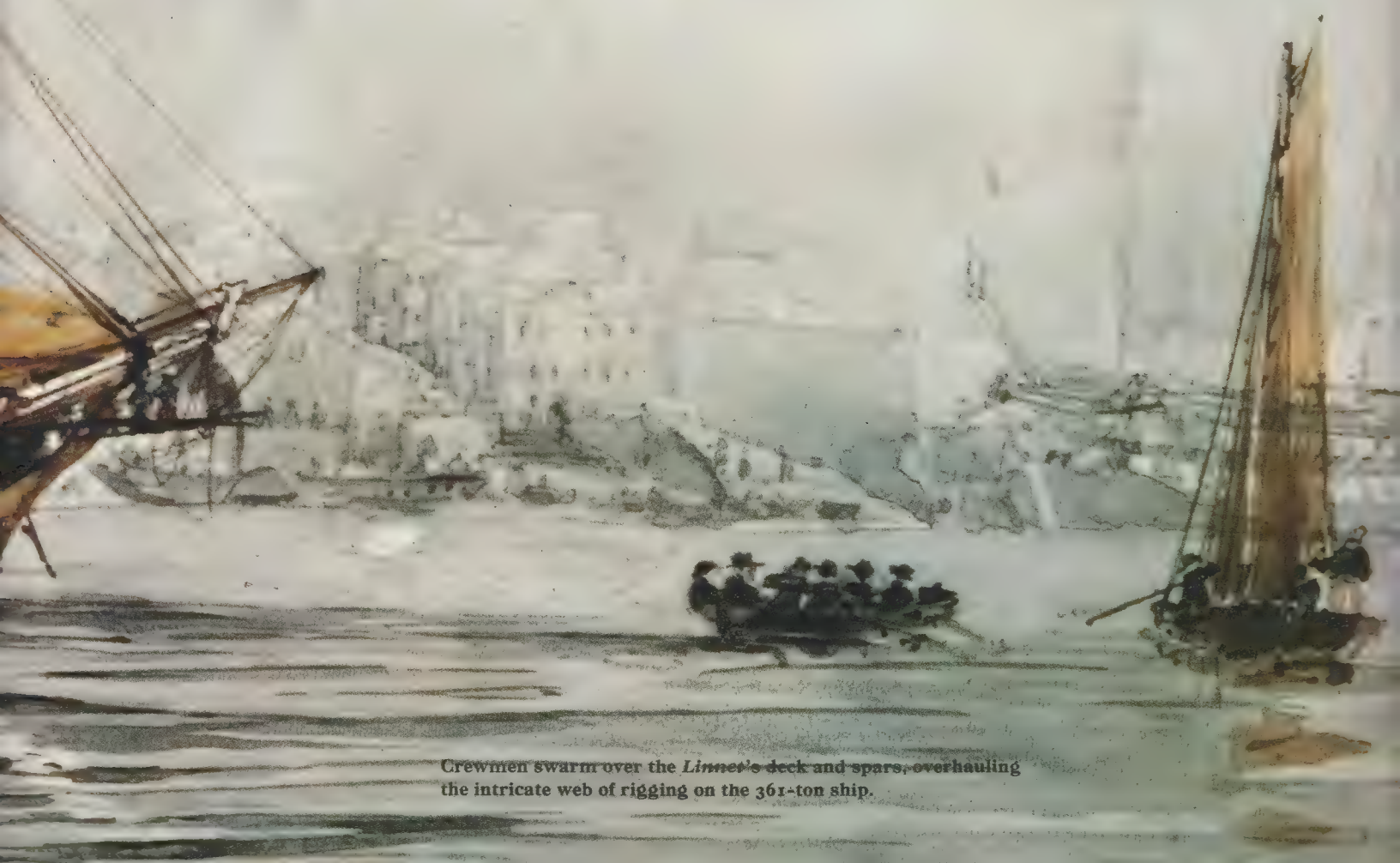
Pursuant to Instructions
from the Lords Commissioners
of the Admiralty, You are
hereby required and directed
to place yourself, in His
Majesty's Sloop Linnet,
under my Command, and
follow all such Orders as
you may from time to time
receive from me for the

Commander Need's orders made him part of a squadron of 20 anti-slave ships patrolling slavers' routes on the West Africa Station.

who condemned the deployment of the "sentimental squadron" and referred snidely to Palmerston's "darling policy." But the *Linnet*'s crew also had much to look forward to: the excitement of the chase and the prospect of promotion and prize-money, for the government had already paid out some £1,300,000 to crews who had made captures.

At Kabenda Bay, a haunt of slavers near the Congo River, African boatmen sell fresh provisions to the *Linnet*'s crew, crying "Hi, Jack! Biggy piggy for hungry belly soldier."

A hundred miles south of the Congo, the *Linnet*'s boat comes ashore at Ambriz, whose deadly liquor knocked sailors unconscious; drunk in the gutters, the tars were easy prey to malaria.



Crewmen swarm over the *Linnet*'s deck and spars, overhauling the intricate web of rigging on the 361-ton ship.

The mosquito-ridden mangrove swamps of the slave coast were known to be rife with malaria and yellow fever. However it was not until 1881 that the mosquito bite was shown to be the cause of both diseases.

Commander Need takes the *Linnet*'s boats up the Pongos River, near Freetown, to search the islands which were a favourite haunt of slave-traders. Here they loaded their newly-purchased merchandise, brought from the interior by negro slave-drivers.

Duties and Dangers Inland

One of Commander Need's tasks was to palaver – to agree with local chiefs on methods of stopping the slave-trade. In 1841, some enterprising officers had struck inland and destroyed the slave-factories which were the marshalling-yards of the trade. But this destruction of property provoked a legal storm, and the following year it became necessary for officers to conclude treaties with native chiefs to give formal sanction to such actions.

Frequent trips ashore were a real danger to British crews, for shore leave brought closer the threat of yellow fever (popularly known as "black vomit"), malaria, dysentery and smallpox. Mortality rates could be appalling: in 1841, for example, 46 men died out of 50 who spent a few days up the Pongos River, Sierra Leone, where the *Linnet* herself patrolled. Such disasters only diminished after 1854 when quinine began to be used regularly as a preventive dosage against fever.

The wily Canybar Allee was one of the many native officials who thrived on the lucrative trade in "black ivory." For such canny merchants the only deterrent was the sight of a British man-of-war.

Commander Need holds a palaver with the King of Ambriz. Though Need represents the greatest power in the world, he is distinguished from his crewmen only by his officer's cap – an unimpressive sight in comparison with the African chief, gorgeously attired and sitting under a fine umbrella of the sort Victoria often sent African potentates.

A Slave-Pirate Cornered

On April 30, 1854, Commander Need captured the slaver *Mellidon*. Like all slavers, she was easy to identify by the stench of her cargo and by sharks ominously tracking in her wake. The *Linnet*'s crew did what they could for the slaves and took the *Mellidon* to the nearest "prize court" for condemnation. As for the ship, she was probably burnt or sawn in half at Destruction Bay, Sierra Leone; her slaves were resettled ashore under the watchful eyes of missionaries.

From 1810 to 1864 the Royal Navy rescued some 150,000 slaves en route for the Americas; at best these represented only 10 per cent of the number exported during those years. The end of the West African slave-trade came in the 1860s when other nations passed the necessary laws or enforced existing ones.

The *Linnet*'s boats close in on a quarry for the capture. The preceding chase could have lasted 24 hours or more for, like many other slavers, the *Mellidon* was a fast clipper.

Below the decks of a captured slaver, slaves enjoy conditions of comparative ease during the journey to port where a special court would make their freedom official.

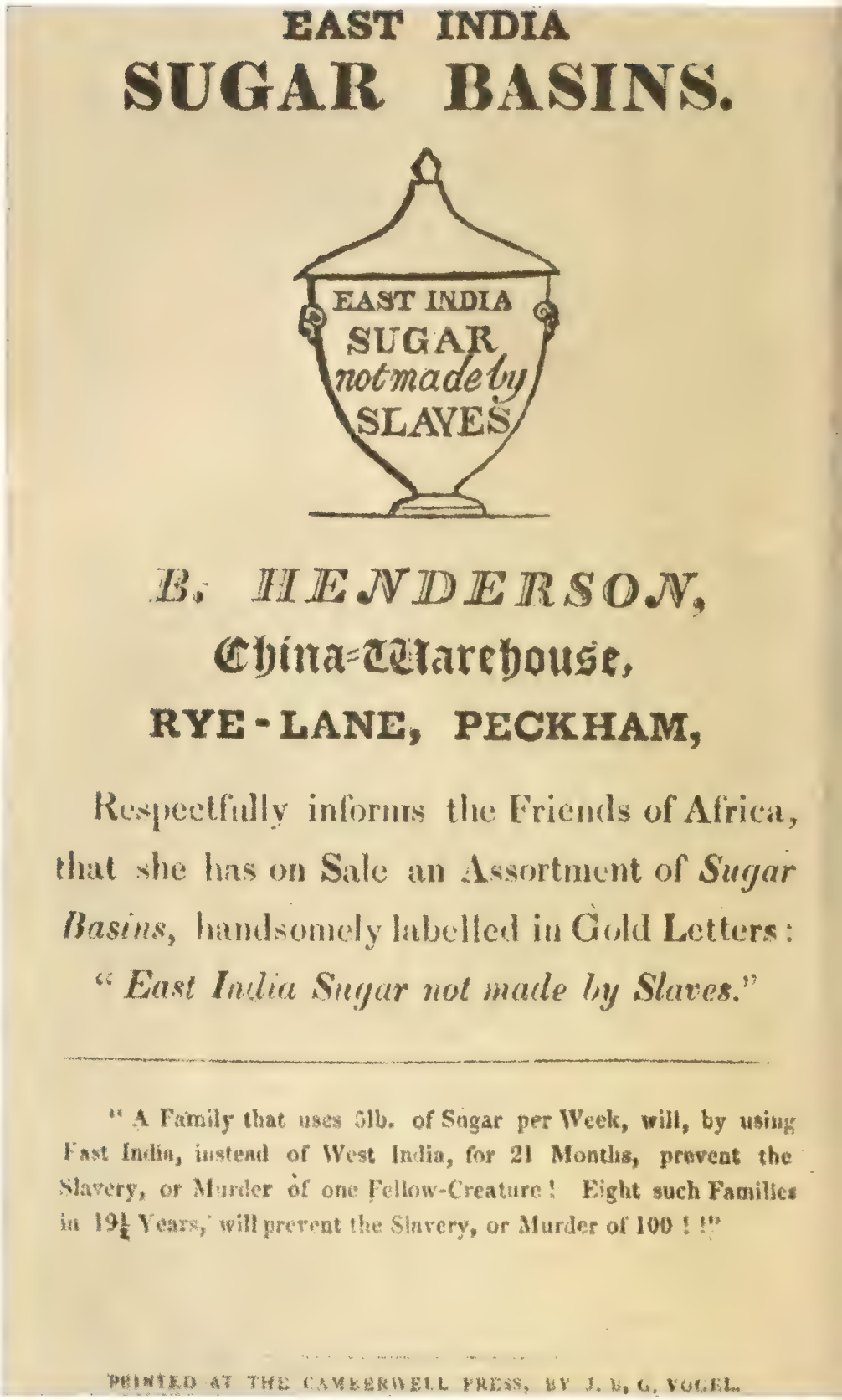
III. Breaking the Bonds

Meanwhile, the mood at home had again softened. To insult the abolitionists as "white nigger Jacobins," the favourite epithet during the French Terror, was now meaningless and old fashioned; for Napoleon had buried Jacobinism. And the French Wars themselves had become a fact of life, and no longer the sole national obsession. There was no further reason for Parliament to postpone "irrelevant" legislation. And the cause had recently had good reason to rejoice: Pitt was back at Number Ten. On May 30, 1804, Wilberforce rose in the House to ask leave to present an Abolition Bill.

The enactment of a law to make the transatlantic slave-trade illegal should, from then on, have been plain sailing. But it was not. Wilberforce's Bill went smoothly through the Commons, but it reached the Lords too late for a full debate in that session. The following year, 1805, Wilberforce introduced it again; this time it could not even pass in the House, partly, at least, because Wilberforce had temporarily lost Pitt's support. For Pitt, physically exhausted by the strain of the French Wars, and challenged by a new and vigorous Opposition Front Bench, feared a legislative rebuff. He had asked Wilberforce to hold back. But Wilberforce went ahead, only to be defeated. Pitt did, however, enact an Order in Council which prevented the stocking of new colonies with slaves.

Pitt died in January, 1806, and was succeeded by Lord Grenville. And on March 25, 1807, the Bill that Grenville's predecessor had so ardently favoured for so long, at last received the King's Assent. As of January 1, 1808, "all manner of dealing and trading" in slaves in Africa and their transport elsewhere was "utterly abolished, prohibited and declared to be unlawful." Any British subject defying this decree faced a fine of £100; and any ship involved was forfeit to the Crown.

Wilberforce and the abolitionists had won their first victory after 18 abrasive years. But the ownership of slaves in British territories was still permitted. And within seven years England was to be responsible for the fate of more blacks than ever. Having defeated Napoleon, she acquired not only additional negro-



This polite prod at the British conscience hid a serious threat to slave-owners. By the 1820s, other sugar-producers were making inroads into their once captive markets.

populated territories in the Carribbean, but two more slave-owning settlements elsewhere – Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean, from the French; and the Cape Colony, which she had seized from the Dutch to protect her sea-routes to India and the Far East.

Outlawing the trade had been battle enough. Enforcing the law along thousands of miles of fever-coast and in the tempestuous latitudes of the Atlantic Ocean was beyond the power of even the Mother of Parliaments. So Westminster turned to the war-worn and overstretched handmaiden of British policy, the Royal Navy, which for nearly 80 years pursued a hard and thankless task of blockading African coastlines west and east and capturing suspected slavers.

Although the Navy's vessels swept the seas clean of most British slave-ships fairly quickly, there were still a few speculators willing to gamble penalties against profits, and to sail stealthily from British and European ports to pick up contraband loads. The government frightened them out of business in 1811, when it branded slaving a felony, punishable by transportation. Parliament went even further in 1824, when it defined slavery as piracy and made death the punishment. There was never any need to enforce this against English slavers; in fact, the threat of execution was meant not for Englishmen, but as a legislative example to other nations which also professed to have outlawed the trade, but did remarkably little to put any sharp teeth into their legislation.

It was foreign renegades who kept Britain's patrols busy. By treaty, Britain had the right to search suspect Spanish and Portuguese vessels north of the Equator; French in certain restricted waters; Dutch and Swedish wherever they encountered them.

The Americans, who had in theory banned the trade three weeks before Britain, were the worst offenders of all. They forbade the boarding of their merchantmen by any warships other than their own, and they detailed a squadron to work together with the British patrols. But the Americans sent out only four or five ships at a time, compared with Britain's dozen. Moreover, since these vesssls were based on the Cape Verde Islands or Madeira, both over 1,000 miles from the main source of slaves on the Guinea coast, they could not be very effective in controlling the illegal slavers who were shipping enormous numbers of slaves to the Southern States. The trade was tremendously lucrative, for the Southerners were importing somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 contraband slaves a year to work their rapidly expanding cotton plantations.

Not only did American smugglers have a relatively free hand, but slavers of other nations needed only run up the Stars and Stripes to force the British watchdogs to sheer off. It was only after the American Civil War, and the emancipation of all slaves on American soil in 1864 that the persistent Yankee slavers were actually put out of business.

The British had by then, of course, long since achieved emancipation in their own colonies. But the road had proved tortuous; it took 25 years after the trade's abolition in 1807 to achieve complete abolition of slavery. During the intervening years, slave-owning, like slave-trading, had come to be widely acknowledged as a social evil, but many Parliamentarians still hesitated to deprive the planters of their labour force. Moreover, it was generally and sincerely felt – and by Wilberforce among others – that with the traffic outlawed, slaves would be treated more humanely; the planters, knowing they could get no new stock, would feel impelled to safeguard the slaves they already owned. Optimists believed that the institution would simply fade away, with the slaves gradually being transformed into free, hired workers.

As a result, Parliament concentrated on encouraging colonial legislatures to enact amelioration statutes. But the planters viewed all such recommendations as unwarranted interference. The sugar islanders were having trouble enough keeping their heads above water without Whitehall's meddling in their domestic affairs.

In many islands, the soil was becoming exhausted. The Napoleonic Wars had blocked the planters from access to European markets. Protective tariffs in England by now were working less to the islands' benefit than to their detriment, for they helped to maintain unrealistically high prices which aroused ever-growing resistance from English consumers. To make matters worse, the East India Company, with unlimited access to inexpensive local coolie labour in the sub-continent, was challenging Caribbean sugar. And cane-planters everywhere were suffering because the sugar-beet, grown both in England and in Europe, was providing an acceptable and cheaper substitute.

The planters' most acute problem, however, grew out of the increasingly rebellious mood of the slaves themselves. The negroes had heard in various garbled forms, of Parliament's efforts to ease their lot, and had over-simplified the complex issue: the planters were denying them the freedom pledged by the English King. In colony after colony, the slaves, taking matters into their own hands, staged devastating uprisings.

One of the worst convulsions took place in Demerara (later part of British Guiana) in 1823, when about 13,000 slaves seized plantations, locked up their white owners and killed two overseers. The Governor called out the troops and vicious fighting followed. After hundreds of rebellious slaves had been killed, peace was restored partly by the military action and partly through the moderating counsel of an English missionary, John Smith, whom the slaves trusted.

To the terrified planters, the revolt pointed a moral: it was exactly what was to be expected of permitting the barbarian negroes even to hear of freedom, let alone actually granting it to them. The authorities over-reacted, in deliberate defiance of repeated requests for more humane treatment, sent to all colonies by the Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst. Among other things, Bathurst recommended rigid limitations on the use of the whip. The Demerarans ignored London, proclaimed martial law and enforced it for months, during which 47 slaves were hanged, three sentenced to 1,000 lashes each, and two of these also condemned to work in chains for the rest of their lives. Many others were flogged and imprisoned.

And the régime went one blundering and fatal step further, an error in judge-

ment which gave greater impetus to the emancipation cause than any other single event during this period. The missionary John Smith, accused of inciting the mutiny, was brought to trial and condemned to death, but with a recommendation for mercy, which the Governor forwarded to London. Before London could act, however, Smith, who was a consumptive, died in a Demerara gaol.

Parliament reviewed the case. Smith's fate provoked petitions to Westminster and led to a stiffening attitude in England towards all colonials, an irritable impatience with their delaying tactics. "For God's sake," fretted the Lord Chancellor, "let the system be abolished as soon as it can be safely and practically effected."

And yet, despite the fact that slavery was by now almost completely discredited as an economic benefit to the Empire; despite the fact that other humanitarian movements were easing conditions for children, for animals, for prisoners, for accused criminals, Parliament listened once more to the abolitionists' arguments, approved them – and for ten more years did absolutely nothing.

Wilberforce, though ailing, led debate after debate, aided by Thomas Fowell Buxton, a young M.P. whom he had chosen as his successor. As in the days of the fight to exterminate the trade, abolitionists were again stumping the country, pamphleteering, proselytizing. The indefatigable Clarkson, weakened by a stroke he had suffered during the first campaign, still continued to organize meetings and write tracts.

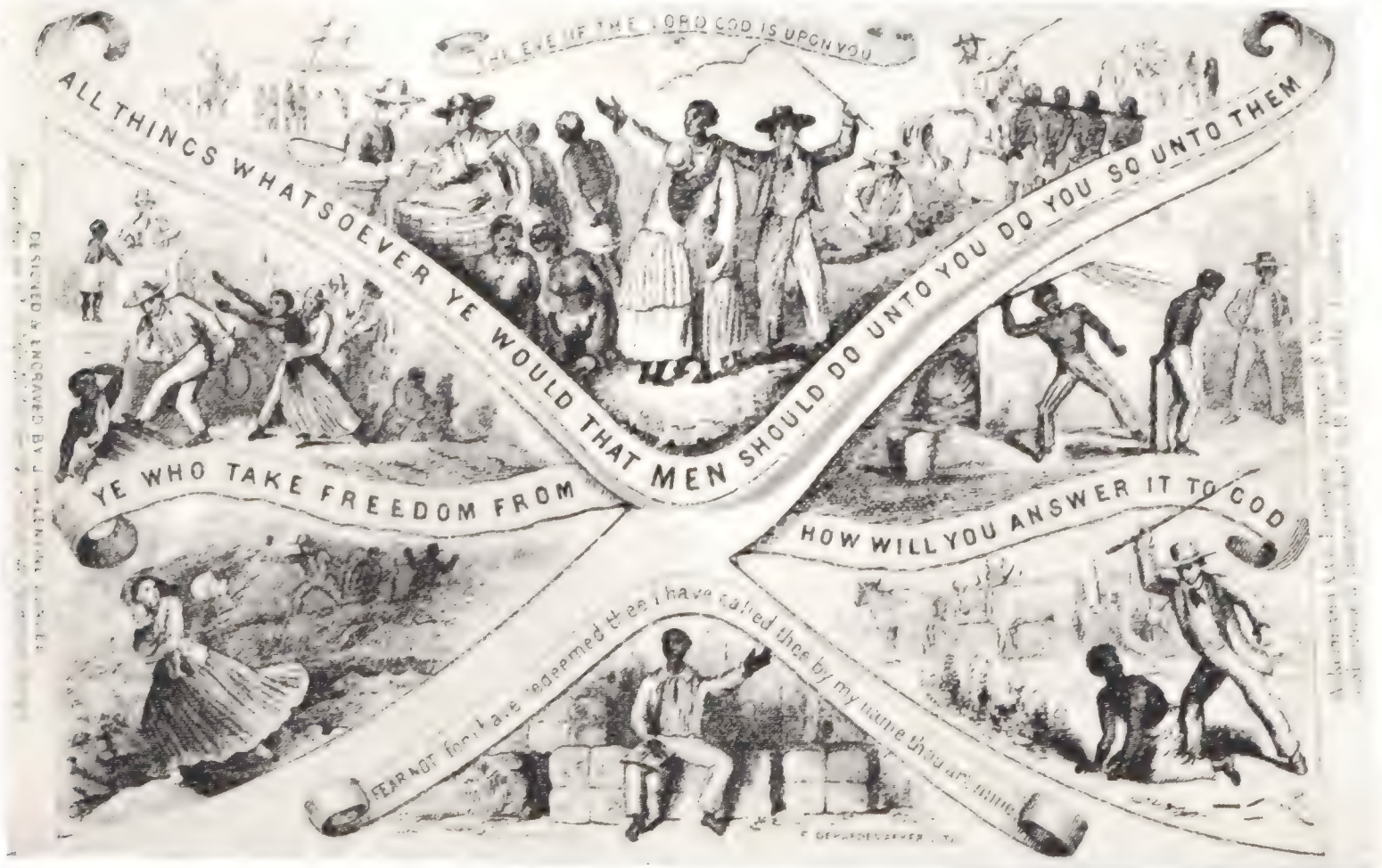
If ever a system was ripe for extinction, that system was slavery in the British colonies. But the planters and their puppets in the colonial assemblies never gave an inch. In answer to a governmental proposal that they accept a new and more humane slave code in exchange for lowered duties on sugar in Britain – probably the best offer the planters ever had – they responded with an immediate and flat rejection. Shopkeepers in St. Lucia staged a week-long protest strike against the new code. And in Jamaica, where the hills were alive with Maroons, slaves who had run away and lived in hiding, the island leaders proposed to establish their own militia, fight the British and demand annexation by the United States where slavery was legal.

The Jamaicans might have anticipated the results. In 1832, 50,000 slaves rose up, murdered a handful of whites and burned white homes. About 400 negroes were killed in the uprising; 100 were later executed. The Jamaicans, aping the Demerarans, tried to blame local English missionaries for the insurrection.

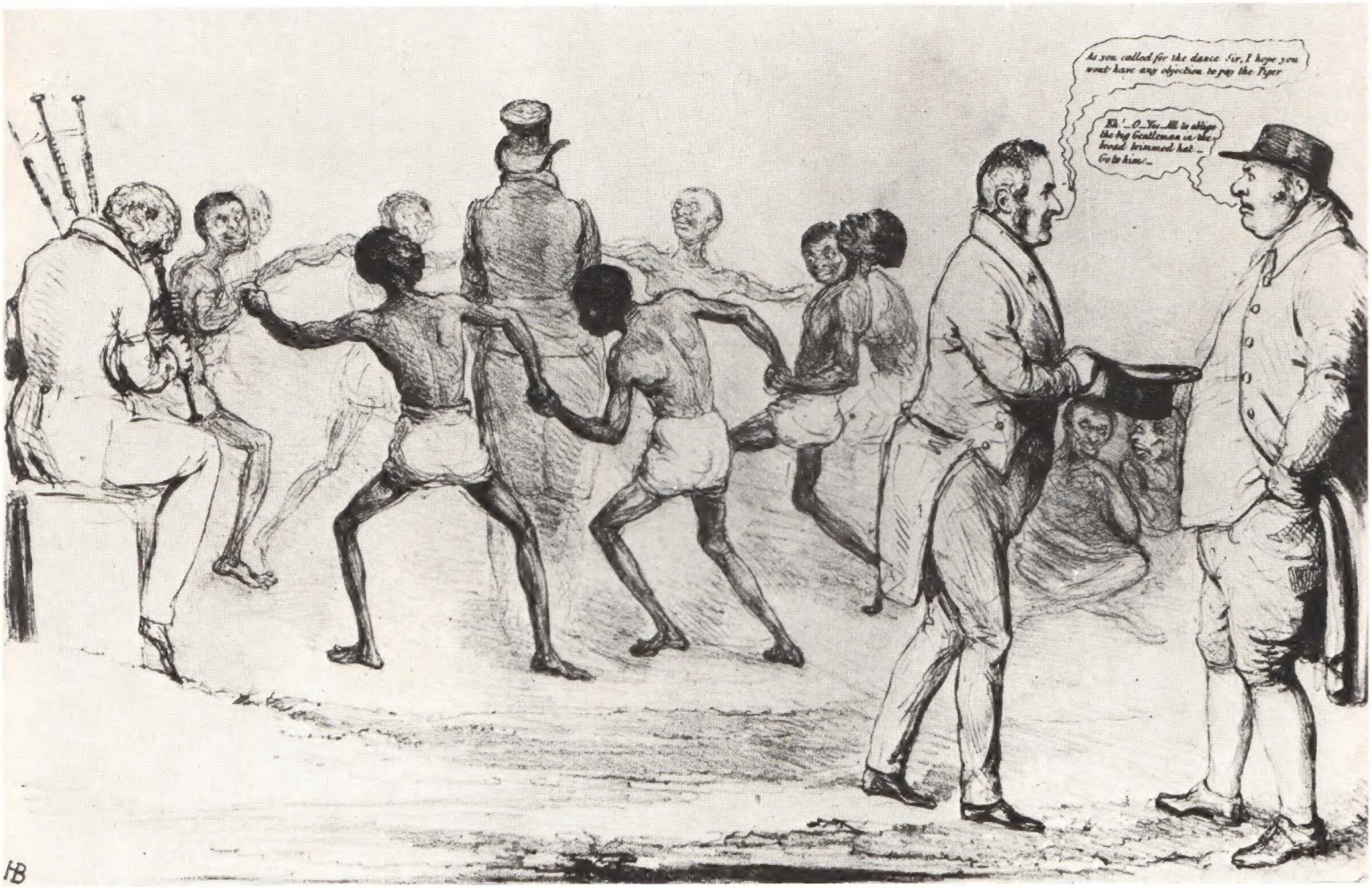
But by now the British public had had enough. The 1832 Reform Bill vastly extending the voting franchise had just been passed, and the newly influential middle class supported the abolition of slavery. They elected new Members to Parliament – men who owed nothing to and would gain nothing from the colonies – to help push the legislation through.

The following year, on July 5, 1833, the Bill was introduced that finally freed the slaves throughout the British Dominions (with the exception of India and St. Helena, where slaves were freed by a special Act in 1843). The measure included guarantees of up to £20,000,000 to compensate the planters for their losses.

Wilberforce, now 74, lay dying. "Thank



Abolitionists employed envelopes like this to convert their friends and business acquaintances. The addressee's name was written on the other side.



Freed negroes dance round the abolitionist, Thomas Fowell Buxton, to the tune of £20,000,000, the compensation offered to former slave-owners. No one, it seems, wants to pay up. The taxpayer expects the government – John Bull (right) – to do so, and he in turn fobs it off on Buxton.

God," he said, "that I should have witnessed a day in which England is willing to give twenty millions sterling for the abolition of slavery." But he did not live to witness the passing of the Act to which he had devoted his life. He died on July 29, exactly on month before the measure finally became law.

As in all great social upheavals, the metamorphosis from slave to free was neither swift, nor was it tidy. It involved some 800,000 negroes in British territories owned by about one-tenth that many whites – almost 900,000 human beings of varying temperaments and varying reactions. The government had injected into the Bill a transition measure, which put freed slaves under indenture to their former masters, for six years in the case of field-hands, four years for other workers. They were required to give 40 hours a week to their old owners, but they had the right to earn cash wages in any job they chose – or could find – for the rest of the time.

The British government compensated the planters for every slave they gave up at about half the estimated local market rate. In British Guiana, it paid £58 a head; in Trinidad, £56; in Barbados, £25; in Jamaica, £23. Children and the aged or ailing were assessed proportionately, in Jamaica, for instance, at £7 for the former and £5 for the latter. British taxpayers doled out £17,669,401 by the time the books were closed. Ironically, little of this found its way into the planters' pockets; most were so heavily in debt that they had no choice but to turn the money over to their creditors in England.

Some of the slave-owners tried to pretend the law had never been passed and, in Jamaica in particular, treated their slaves even more harshly than before. As for the slaves themselves, there was a general sullen resistance: this was not freedom after all, but a confusing and disappointing limbo. Their resentment immediately inhibited production.

In 1835, Antigua planters, seeing their meagre profits drop, voluntarily abandoned the system. They freed their slaves absolutely, and then hired them to work their crops for pay. Other islands followed suit, and by August 1, 1838, the last ties of bondage between masters and blacks had been severed.

Then in 1848, came the islanders' *coup de grâce*: preferential tariffs on Empire sugar entering Great Britain were ended. The hard-pressed planters were now forced to compete with the slave-grown sugar of Spanish Cuba and of Brazil,

neither of which freed their negroes until the 1880s. Numerous colonials simply gave up altogether, selling their properties at tremendous losses. Some turned to other crops, fruit, for instance, in most cases with only moderate success.

And what of the sugar island slaves?

Many stayed with their former owners, working under more or less the same conditions, but compensated for their misery now with a little cash. Many others scraped and saved to buy or rent tiny plots of land of their own, and clustered into all-black villages. A few, unable to cope with the demands of freedom, drifted aimlessly – dissolute, unemployable, lost.

The Caribbean, from the Empire's point of view, had passed its prime. Not so, Mauritius, which, after the emancipation of her 70,000 negroes, actually produced greater revenues than she had done before. Instead of trying to hire their former slaves, her planters turned to near-by India for indentured workers who quickly raised the sugar output. The few skilled negroes managed to find work. Those who could do nothing but till the fields became vagrants and criminals, and their population went into a decline.

Slavery died within the Empire. But neither legislation nor naval power was enough to abolish slavery – or even the trade – elsewhere. Buxton published an impassioned review of slave-trading in 1839 showing that after 30 years' effort by Britain to suppress the trade, the number of slaves exported from Africa had risen threefold.

For another 50 years, British vessels patrolled the African coastline for suspected slavers. Gradually the Pax Britannica stamped out the trade, with a corresponding extension of British control. Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Zanzibar, East Africa and the Sudan all fell under British sway, partly as a result of her determination to end the trade.

As other nations followed in putting into practice their official ideals, the remaining traders were suppressed everywhere. The American Civil War finished trading in the Southern States; the Portuguese and Spanish trade to Brazil and Cuba was over by the 1870s. The Arab slave-trade ended only at the turn of the century.

One nation – the Boers – remained obdurate. To escape British authority, which insisted on the equality of races, the Boers set off northwards on the Great Trek across the Vaal River to build afresh on their own principles. The Transvaal constitution of 1856 stated that they would "permit no equality between coloured people and white inhabitants, either in Church or state," a principle that later became known as "Apartheid." It was one step removed from slavery, but it was a long way from the legal equality which was by then official British policy. The Boers constituted Britain's greatest failure to carry through the humanitarian ideals of the abolitionists Empire-wide, and its effects would be a major factor in world history for many long years to come.

This cartoon queries the value of freedom. After emancipation the freed slaves emerged from the plantation huts, from memories of dealers' dungeons and slavers' stinking holds, to find, not the bright world of freedom, but a new bondage of poverty. Without the support of the slave system which had brought them to foreign shores, many were left helplessly stranded.

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The earliest surviving English pewter tankards date from about 1650. Like that offered here, they have flat lids, though whether for hygiene, security or simply to make more work for the influential guild of craftsmen is not really known.

Traditional Design

Lids became less popular after about 1690, and went out of use altogether about 1830. By this time the original tin and lead mixture from which pewter had for centuries been made had been replaced by an alloy of tin and antimony.

The pewter tankard offered to you here combines the best of both worlds. Its traditional design is based on 17th century lidded tankards, while the metal is a completely lead-free alloy.

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Foot Guards, 1807